

January 19, 1973

Nobel Committee  
Swedish Academy of Literature  
Börshuset  
S-11129 Stockholm SWEDEN

Gentlemen,

This letter is prompted by a communication I have received from Mr. Meyer W. Weisgal concerning the candidacy of Elie Wiesel for the Nobel Prize in literature.

My own experience as a Nobel laureate in physiology or medicine (1958) informs me, what Mr. Weisgal may not know, that I have no standing with respect to the formal process of your deliberations. I have received many similar requests that I have felt obliged to disregard and even were I to forward my commendations I am sure they could have little influence on your own expert evaluation of Wiesel's work as literature. I am confident that this would, in any case, be valued very highly in your own eyes. It is impossible for me to say how you might compare its literary quality with other worthy contenders.

I do make a rare exception in attempting to address you about Wiesel because his unique role in the relationship of literature to history might readily be misunderstood. It is difficult to imagine a writer whose works would better qualify with respect to "idealistic tendency" as prescribed in Alfred Nobel's testament. The misunderstanding may emerge that Wiesel's historic role has been to ensure that the holocaust would not be forgotten. But how could the work of any contemporary writer be commensurate with such an enormous, monstrous, historical fact! The real danger might have been that the holocaust remain unforgettable but totally beyond human comprehension and to that extent put out of mind as a matter outside the human experience. There are grave tendencies through the years and today that continue to encourage such a repression, in effect such a dehumanization of history.

For many many people Wiesel has played the role, and this is his principal contribution, of making the holocaust more nearly real, more nearly understandable and in that way beyond repression and forgetting. In this sense Wiesel's work may be taken to be an ultimate exposition of the very function of art and of literature.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr

cc to Meyer Weisgal